

On Guilt
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A week or so ago, I read a novel by William Maxwell (1908-2000), *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, originally published in 1980—I read the 2011 Vintage edition. The book is called a novel, but it seemed to me to be a fictionalized memoir. In any case, the book is about a man of advanced age looking back on his boyhood, the key elements of which were his sense of aloneness, an oblivious father, a detached brother, and the death of his mother. Central to the story--this part seemed fictionalized, though to what extent it isn't clear--is a murder-suicide committed by the father of a close teenage friend.

So Long, See You Tomorrow is a very good book; I'd put it in the bottom half of the top rank. That's all I'll say about the worth of the book. This isn't a book review. Rather, it is about what an episode in the book brought up for me about my own life. The murder-suicide separated the two friends, and they meet by chance in Chicago a year-and-a-half after the tragic events. In an incident that I believe happened in Maxwell's own life, though I assume not in a murder-suicide context--the narrator (really, Maxwell) passes by his friend without as much as offering a word or gesture of consolation. A highly sensitive boy, who knows well the hurt of slights, slights another.

Writing this novel, Maxwell, so it seems, is attempting to deal with his profound regret, guilt, and self-recrimination around this snubbing incident. Putting words to that moment is his attempt to see what it was about, why it was, and what he can, and should, do now about it now. I assume he hopes he can come to a resolution, completion, with reference to it.

This episode with the friend in the *So Long, See You Tomorrow* brought up comparable memories for me. Like the narrator in the book, I am old, and as in the book, these events—events plural in my case--happened decades ago but nevertheless

are vividly present in my mind, in all of my being, in this moment as I write these words. Perhaps this writing will, as I presume it did for Maxwell, provide me a measure of understanding and peace (I'm unsettled, in disequilibrium) and direction (what to do now).

In my case, it's three incidents from decades ago. They all involved people very close to me, and it would be a breach of confidence if I revealed their identities or related the particulars of what happened. And anyway, the focus here isn't on the details of what transpired but rather why they did from my side; what was it about me that accounted for my actions? I hope what I do in these pages with as much candor as I can allow myself will prompt you to do something similar with regard to guilt you live with.

As I reflect on these three moments in my life, I see that they all were fundamentally the same: I turned away someone close to me who needed me; I wasn't there for that person when I should have been. I realize now—I didn't then, or for many years—that what I did hurt them; I hurt them. I feel really bad about what I did: profound regret, guilt, self-condemnation. There's an ache in my pit of stomach right now.

I've come up with four explanations—not justifications, what I did wasn't justified—for why I didn't do what I should have done in those instances. They have to do with what was going on with me then, what I was like. The nature of the written word requires me to list these four truths about me back then—or I think they are truths—in an order, one, two, three, four. This can leave the impression that there is a sequence, or hierarchy, to this list, that the first one is the most basic or important, or that it leads to the second one and on through the list. Rather than anything like that, all four existed concurrently inside me, were part of me, and affected and augmented and reinforced the others. Together they formed the basis—the organic, physically felt, inner referent—for how I conducted my life. They were the self—the me--or a big part of it anyway, that was the grounding, the underpinning, for

deciding what I would do in my life, including, in this case, turning away, not being there for, three people who needed me.

The four:

I wasn't fully there. In response to very difficult childhood experiences, without consciously choosing it or realizing it, I went into, and stayed in, what amounts to a post-traumatic stress state. I was removed, detached, on automatic pilot. I've recently learned that the psychological term for this way of being is *dissociation*—not associated, remote, unconnected to, removed from, reality. People and situations were “over there,” not quite real. I wasn't quite real to myself or, so I felt, real to the world around me. It was as if I didn't exist as more than a disembodied consciousness. I remember being surprised when I would see my reflection in a store window.

I wasn't well. To have conducted myself as I should have, I needed to be in sound physical and mental shape, and I wasn't. Words that come to me, I was *damaged, crippled, handicapped, fettered.*

I believed it didn't matter what I did. I thought I was useless, worthless, immaterial. If I did or didn't turn someone away was of no consequence. Nothing I did mattered, nothing I did affected anything, made any difference, because *I didn't matter.* In my own eyes, I was unneeded, unnecessary, nobody, nothing.

I wasn't my own person. I wasn't clear and committed about what I believed in, what I considered right and decent, what my responsibilities were, what I was trying to achieve in my life. I wasn't an independent, self-determining, autonomous human being. I was reactive, shaped by my circumstances and immediate impulses.

While this is the first time I have put these four personal realities together in a configuration, call it that, over the past few years—sadly late in life—I have identified these problematic aspects of myself one-by-one and gone to work on them, and with gratifying results. So much more now than before, I'm here, present, in this moment, mindful, awake, alive. I've far healthier physically and mentally, psychologically, than I was. I now believe I have worth, value, that what I do matters, counts for something. I know, clearly, articulately—I have words for it--what I stand for, and experience in the whole of my being a strong resolve to manifest that in my world. Circumstances and people don't change how I conduct my life as they did before. I make mistakes, plenty of them, but in recent years—three, four, five?--I haven't done anything that I feel guilty about.

This time of reflection has resulted in the realization that the three people whom I rejected, turned away, had, prior to this time, done the same thing to me, and repeatedly. Up until now, I have only thought about my actions (a corollary of being nothing is that what others do to you is beside the point). What they did, and have done since, doesn't excuse what I did back then. I should have done the right thing regardless of their actions. I shouldn't have mirrored their behavior, which I now see I did. But shining a light on their conduct has put things in context, with the result that I don't feel as bad about what happened as before. Responsibility and accountability go both ways: I should be good to the people in my life, but they should be good to me as well. I get that now, finally.

Writing these words and the reflection that informed them has brought me greater self-understanding and self-acceptance. The regret about what happened is still there, and the sadness, but the self-blame and guilt have lessened markedly. My strongest sense of things now is that I wasn't a bad person back then, I was a flawed person. I meant well. I just didn't do well.

What do I do now about the three people I hurt? I've not been in contact with any of them for many years. Do I seek them

out and—oh, I don't know, I don't know. I have to work that through. All I know for certain is I failed them and I'm very, very sorry, and I hope they are happy and well in their lives now. Perhaps there is no need to do anything now. Perhaps it is too late to do anything. Perhaps the period at the end of this sentence is the end of this matter for me.